



Pipe Major Corner



When you are expecting a fastball and you get pitched a curveball, all you can do is use that extra split-second to make adjustments. You change your approach and your expectations. So, that is what we are doing!

The Band had been moving forward on plans to participate in the 50th Festival Interceltique in Lorient, France in August, but in early April our Board of Directors made the tough (but obvious) decision to withdraw from the event. The Festival has since been postponed to 2021, along with so many other sports and cultural events worldwide. We cannot help but be disappointed; however, if we are collectively “out of the woods” at this time next year, the invitation still stands for PCPB to be a guest band in Lorient. We will hope for the best.

Our last in-person band practices took place in late February. When the shelter-in-place restrictions were established in mid-March, we quickly got on the Zoom bandwagon and we have had weekly videoconferences with the Junior Band and bi-weekly with the Senior Band. It’s not the same as meeting and making music together in the same room, but we’ve still had productive and fun sessions.

Weekly piping and drumming lessons via Zoom, Skype or FaceTime are now the norm, and the kids seem to have enough practice time in between. Everyone is making great progress. Drumming instructor Kathleen Smith and I cannot wait until we get this Junior Band together...it will be a musical sensation!

So, when the curve ball comes in, you can still get a hit and maybe more, as you’ll find in this newsletter. And here’s looking to the day when we can enjoy some music together without the aid of computers and internet connections. Please stay safe and healthy, everyone!

Ken Sutherland
Pipe-Major and Board President

Big Music for Big Times: The Lament for the Children

As we grapple with the current pandemic crisis, we might remember a uniquely Scottish story of the convergence of plague, tragedy, and creativity. The tune, “The Lament for the Children” is considered one of the masterpieces of traditional Scottish music. It is a piobaireachd written by a father in response to the ravage of smallpox on the Isle of Skye. This plague outbreak claimed seven of his eight sons. That father was Pdraig Mor MacCrimmon. Pdraig was born c1595 into a family of hereditary pipers in service to Clan MacLeod. Pdraig’s talents were extraordinary:

“As a composer of Piobaireachd he had no equal. His compositions are quite outstanding and still stand the test of time today. Where his father, Donald Mor MacCrimmon, tended to keep to one key — G A B D E, Pdraig produced tunes of ingenuous melody with themes of varying moods using every key available on the Highland bagpipe. He composed ‘Lament for the Children’ after seven of his eight sons had died of smallpox is a great classic. It is a magnificent piece in the key of D.” wrote Captain John MacLellan, the late head of the Army School of Piping.

As legend holds, this sorrowful episode occurred around the 1650’s when a Spanish ship landed on the Isle of Skye near the district around Dunvegan. The crew took the disease ashore with them. The inhabitants were defenseless, armed only with the gift of remembrance. However, the following is an excerpt from an article written for The Times of London in respect to the “Lament for the Children”:

“As a writer, the older I get the more I’m convinced that the chief virtue in great art is courage. When I hear ‘Lament for the Children,’ I detect courage at the heart of it.” Says Angus Peter Campbell, Gaelic scholar, who lives on the Isle of Skye.

As we navigate the future while still in the grips of our modern day COVID-19 pandemic, listen to “Lament for the Children” and discover for yourself why piobaireachd is called “Big Music” – a music capable of servicing souls in search of courage during “Big Times” such as these.



The memorial stone (left) written in Gaelic at Borraig near Dunvegan translates as “The Memorial Cairn of the MacCrimmons of whom ten generations were the hereditary pipers of

MacLeod and who were renowned as composers, performers and instructors of the classical music of the bagpipe. Near to this post stood the MacCrimmons’ School of Music.

Junior Band Members Hitting it Out of the Park!

While the pandemic has kept our players sheltered in place at home, they still find time to compete and to entertain the public. Here are a few snippets:

Playing on the BBC...

Stanford Economics Professor, Nick Bloom (Amelia, Alex and Chloe’s Dad) was interviewed by BBC Radio for a segment on how businesses and workers are adjusting to the challenges of working from home. Nick had mentioned that his kids played the pipes, so the reporter asked Nick for two recordings of Alex and Amelia – one of them warming up and another playing a tune together. For some reason, the BBC only used the recording of the warm-up...thus perpetuating the rumor that pipers spend 90% of their time tuning up!



Alex and Amelia Bloom

When “Contest Platform” has a different meaning...

On-line piping and drumming competitions have sprung up to replace the Highland Games contests (the last in-person contest in California was the Redding Bagpipe Competition on March 7.) On-line contests are not a new phenomenon though they certainly have grown in size and frequency these days, with various procedures and software/recording platforms being used! Junior Band piper Colin Thurber entered several of the contests, earning three prizes including a first place in the Grade 4 “Mini-MSR” event. Congratulations, Colin!



Colin Thurber competes in his own home

Celebrating St. Patrick’s Day with a family serenade...

The Cooper Family was out in full force (while maintaining a safe distance of course!) on St. Patrick’s Day, serenading their very appreciative neighbors with a few tunes as the shelter-in-place was just beginning. Henry (pipes) and Will (drums) joined their dad Brian (also on pipes). Mom Stacey Plaskett is a PCPB Board member and Uniform Quartermaster, while Brian is Pipe-Sergeant of the Senior Band and a Junior Band instructor. The family that plays together, stays together...literally!



The Coopers entertain the neighborhood

Making good use of extra time...

Nothing like a Shelter-in-Place to improve your drumming chops! Junior Band drummer Henry Stockett exhibiting perfect game focus at home in San Francisco.



Henry Stockett in his element

What Do You Miss?

We asked our members to share what they miss most while having to shelter in place. Here are a few replies, along with unsolicited comments from “Grand-Pipey” who apparently had some extra time on his hands.

Dan McNear, Sr Band Piper, Treasurer-for-Life and Corner Smart*ss

“Thursday night bocce.”

(It seems that should be an essential activity! – GP)

Annika Snow, Jr Band Piper

“I never thought I would be saying this but...SCHOOL!”

(Your folks are right with you on that one, Annika! – GP)

Colin Thurber, Jr Band Piper (with a laugh)

“Band practice, honestly. I mean, school I can live without!”

(Hmmm...the Force is strong in this one... – GP)

Alanna Deely, Snare

“I just miss the craic.”

(To clarify, Alanna is not referring to a street drug. Craic, pronounced “crack”, is an Irish and Highlands term meaning fun, good times, enjoyable banter, etc. – GP)

Sean Connolly, Sr Band Snare

“Tucking into a Mexican burrito in the Scottish Callie Club during band practice lunch breaks.”

(I’m not missing the heartburn, though... -- GP)

Lara and Emma Thomsen, Jr Band Pipers both said the exact same thing even though they were asked separately:

“I miss being able to play with friends and visit family.”

(So true. What could possibly be better? – GP)

Henry Stockett, Jr Band Snare

“I miss the social aspect of being in a band.”

(Well stated, Henry. – GP)

Beth Sachrison, Sr Band Tenor

Shenanigans with my band buds.

(Same as Henry but with Beth’s Tucson vernacular. – GP)

Elon Bauer, Sr Band Tenor

“The gym...”

(What, you work out? – GP)

Ken Koupal, Band Logistics Manager

“What I miss the most is the joy of standing next to the familiar and emerging talent in the band.”

(And we miss standing there with you, Ken! Though it may be a while, we’ll be back in the circle again! – GP)

Stevie McElhaney, Sr Band Piper

“Although this memory will never be forgotten by anyone who knows the pipe band life, there is the existence of purity, and oneness in the circle, that is discovered by those who apply their best. That I truly miss, plus the good times we have at El Farolito, Fil-Am Cuisine 2, and the Di Napoli Ristorante & Pizzeria, Mama Mia! Go PC!!!!!!!”

(I’m speechless. This says it all! – GP)

Pat Connolly Enters the NYC Music Scene

Ever since this global pandemic swept into New York City, New Yorkers have been hanging out of their windows promptly at 7pm to bang on pots and pans and cheer in thanks for the tireless and risky work of healthcare workers and grocery store clerks who keep us safe and nourished. This practice did not originate in New York City, but in typical Big Apple fashion it built into a “thing” here. Soon someone was blaring Frank Sinatra singing “New York, New York” at the 7pm bells and then a tuba player would join in, no doubt furloughed from a Broadway orchestra pit and wanting to keep his/her lip. A variation of the inmates taking over the asylum is all over New York City.

I was a happy and dutiful inmate with my pot and pan who one day thought about what more I could do. I remembered I was a bagpiper for my entire life; my decades-long journey began with PCPB in 1970 as a student of Bill Merriman and a member of the junior band. Maybe I could resurrect my pipes and blow a wee tune out my window after the tuba player finished. I did that and got a big cheer. I somehow graduated myself to the front of my building where I have played every night at 7pm for the last few weeks. Everyone is looking for some sort of human connection, which is difficult enough in normal times. I played “Happy Birthday” for Bob who turned 80 and “Amazing Grace” for Tom’s dad from Glasgow who just died the day before. The doorman Hector, who is the most connected of any of us, is practically my agent. I have been written up in the local neighborhood blog, I have a radio interview pending with WCBS and I will soon be collaborating with Laurent, the French electric guitarist from around the corner.



PCPB alumus Pat Connolly provides NYC music therapy

The most meaningful part of this experience is of course being of service to the healthcare workers. And my secret tribute to them is trying to blow steady and not make a mistake. Truly. But the sense of community and the wonderful people I have met makes me mindful once again of one of the amazing things about being a piper and that is the joy we bring to so many. The laughter and the tears. I am always amazed by it. And for now, until whenever, it will keep me coming back.

We Have a New Board Member



The PCPB’s newest board member is Dave Stockett, father of Junior Band drummer Henry Stockett. Dave’s introduction to the PCPB came as a yearly attendee of the Pleasanton Games—an annual tradition that

he and his wife have maintained since the 1990s. Henry, having grown up enjoying the pipe band competitions at the Games, eventually expressed an interest in getting involved as a drummer, which ultimately led Dave to reach out to the PCPB.

Dave grew up in Southern California but has called the Bay Area his home since 1991. Dave lives in San Francisco with his wife Melanie, Henry and their two dogs, Malloy and Reed. While he has no background whatsoever playing in a pipe band, Dave has a strong interest in music and has played guitar since he was a teenager. Dave currently works as an automation engineer for Grail, a biotech company located in Menlo Park.



ZOOM PRACTICE!